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Iowa School Districts Help Reduce Achievement Gap State Board of Education honors six Iowa districts with Breaking Barriers award

DES MOINES, Iowa – Six school districts were honored by the State Board of Education yesterday for improving gaps in student achievement. Davenport, Fort Dodge, Keokuk, Marshalltown, Norwalk and Waterloo community school districts each received a Breaking Barriers to Learning and Teaching Award, which was created by the State Board of Education to recognize successful efforts to eliminate achievement gaps by improving instruction, curriculum and programs, and professional development opportunities for school staff.

"Reducing the disparity in academic performance between groups of students is essential here in Iowa. It is a goal of the State Board of Education to ensure that all students in the state are prepared to succeed," said State Board of Education President Rosie Hussey. "I am honored to recognize those districts that are making substantial strides in doing just that."

Districts earned the award if they made significant improvement among any subgroup of students in at least one grade level and subject, without allowing any other subgroup of students to decline significantly.

Highlights of the Breaking Barriers to Learning and Teaching Awards:

The Davenport Community Schools is being awarded for reducing achievement gaps among seventhand eighth-grade special education students in math, and fourth-, fifth-, seventh-, and eighth-grade
special education students in reading. The district's work on early identification of student needs
through diagnostic assessments and appropriate interventions helped with this achievement.

Another factor was the district's instructional model that allows students with behavior disorders to
spend the majority of their day in the general education setting. In addition, collaborative teaching
occurs across the district with special education teachers and their general education partner.

And these teachers set high expectations. Staff development helps support teachers in developing a
belief in setting high expectations for all students.

The Fort Dodge Community School district made improvements among fifth-grade special education students in math, and fourth- and fifth-grade special education students in reading. District representatives said they feel that the most important action the district has taken to affect the change is the inclusion of special education students in all regular classroom activities. There is no longer a separate curriculum for these students; they receive the same curriculum with accommodations made as needed. General education and special education teachers work together to plan lessons, review assessment data, and ensure their students succeed.

The Keokuk Community School District reduced achievement gaps among fifth- and eighth-grade special education students in reading. In addition, the district also made strides with low-income students in both reading and math. When responding to how the district made these improvements, one answer was given, "increasing reading practice." In fact, the district goal is an additional 30-60 minutes of reading practice for students and it has added over 35,000 books to its libraries.

District representatives added, however, that no one action was the key component, but a range of actions and strategies were required. They also added that increasing student achievement is a goal for all students.

The Marshalltown Community School District is being recognized for reducing achievement gaps among seventh-grade and eighth-grade special education students in reading, and seventh-grade English language learners in reading. In addition, it made improvement with fifth-grade English language learners in math and sixth-grade Hispanic students in reading. The district directly credits teachers with making these improvements. Specifically, hiring, training and retaining highly competent and compassionate professional educators. The district also implemented evidence-based strategies to meet specific identified needs of its students and develops professional development plans focused on increasing the capacity of staff to address student needs that have been identified through data analysis. The result is positively influencing future student achievement.

The Norwalk Community School District is being awarded for making improvements among seventhgrade special education students in reading and math. The district commends its school board for playing a role in this achievement by allowing the individual teachers the freedom to try innovative means to increase student achievement. Teacher quality provides funds to allow teachers to be trained and develop these innovative ideas. In addition, the district continually reviews curriculum data on a prekindergarten – 12th grade basis, provides teachers with district wide and building specific professional development, and aligns classroom, building, and district goals in order to help all students achieve.

The Waterloo Community School District made improvements in student achievement among seventhand eighth-grade special education students in reading. In addition, the district improved achievement
among sixth- and 11th-grade Hispanic students in reading. Representatives from Waterloo said, "In
Waterloo, we view diversity as an asset. While it is true there are challenges associated with meeting
the needs of a diverse learning population, each child comes with special interests, talents, and
backgrounds on which to build." The district's data-driven decision making process used across the
district on a daily basis allows it to hone in on areas that will truly make a difference for kids and the
knowledge and skills they gain.

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The State Board of Education and the Iowa Department of Education provide oversight, supervision, and support for the state education system that includes all public elementary and secondary schools, nonpublic schools that receive state accreditation, area education agencies, community colleges, and teacher preparation programs. The State Board of Education consists of ten members: nine voting members who are appointed by the governor for six-year terms and subject to Senate confirmation; and one nonvoting student member who serves a one-year term, also appointed by the governor.